

# KALIŠTE

---

*By Catherine Coulter*



***In loving memory of my Mom Rena Coulter,  
Aunt Lucy Sevcik, grandma Wilma  
Valentin and grandpa Dori Valentin***

\*\*\*\*\*

***To Emma & Hannah Dolhai and to  
Benjamin & Alexandra Coulter:  
The view back from where you came is  
as important as where you are going to.***

## **Prologue**

The story began in 1940 but in actual fact, it began long before that. This is the story of a family's survival during the Holocaust but it is also the story of those who did not survive. The story is told so that others will remember.

The family that survived is my family – my grandma Wilma Valentin (nee Politzer), my grandfather Teodor (Dori or Theodore) Valentin (formerly Weiskopf, or “Whitehead”), my Aunt Lucy (Sevcik) and my mom Rena (Coulter). The Politzer side of the family was extremely large, although only a few survived the war with most making their way contemporaneously or afterwards to Israel, Bolivia, the U.S. or Canada. The Weiskopf side of the family was smaller and those who survived made their way to England or the U.S. The Politzer side of the family has been written about before, in Shalva and Chaim Klement's “The Politzer's of Stupne”, and it is hoped that a more comprehensive history of the rest of the family will one day be written.

At the end of the war in 1945, Wilma started writing detailed letters from Czechoslovakia (in the German language) to her parents who were at that time living in New York City. In them, she described their ordeals during the war. Those letters became the basis for an English write-up which she did after retiring in New York City in 1974. While some work has been undertaken to move the text from first person to third person and to change antiquated language, it remains Wilma's story although it has also been supplemented with the memories of both Rena and Lucy. Those memories come primarily from their video interviews with The Shoah Foundation in 1998 but they also come from more recent discussions with and a review of this book by Lucy.

I dedicate this book to Aunt Lucy and to the memory of my mom, grandma Wilma and grandfather Dori, but I also dedicate this book to all who came before and those whose lives were silenced far too early.

*For the dead and the living, we must bear witness. – Elie Wiesel*

Catherine Coulter, 2017



*Wedding of Theodore (Dori) Weiskopf (Valentin) and Wilma Politzer  
May 22, 1934 – Vienna, Austria*

### **The Beginning (1940-1942)**

Wilma's story begins in September 1940, after the start of WWII in 1939. Before then the family was relatively unscathed by what was going on elsewhere on the continent, protected in part due to the fact that Dori had changed his name from Weiskopf to Valentin in around 1928 so as to have better job opportunities in the government after graduating from veterinary school. In addition, although Dori and Wilma had a Jewish wedding and although Lucy was born Jewish in 1936, the family converted to Catholicism shortly before Rena was born on May 10, 1938. In this way, life carried on relatively peacefully until late 1940.



*Rena, Wilma & Lucy – 1940 (Žilina)*

Czechoslovakia broke apart in 1939 with Slovakia became an independent state with Tiso as its president. Tiso was also a puppet collaborator with Germany and he was tried and hanged after the war for atrocities committed by him. In 1940, Dori was assigned to the poor rural region in Orava, and the town of Dolný Kubín became the family's new home. Although he was mostly to do meat inspections for the region, it didn't take long for the local farmers to realize that they had a capable veterinarian amongst them who could help with their farm animals. Thus he was able to earn a living as well as to receive some payment in food and make friendships which helped later during the war. This was particularly helpful when Dori was dismissed from his government job in September 1940 due to the fact that he was Jewish.

In June 1941, Dori's father Sigmund Weiskopf died suddenly in Kopčany, Slovakia after a stroke and Wilma, together with Lucy and Rena, stayed with his mother Malvina (nee Rotter) for about six weeks so as not to leave her all by herself. Later in the fall, they spent another month with her. Apart from Dori's need to change jobs and the matter of Sigmund's death however, life continued on relatively normally until March of 1942.



*Malvina (Rotter) Weiskopf and Sigmund Weiskopf*



### **The Politzers and Waldapfels**

Wilma's mother Irene Politzer (nee Waldapfel) married Julius Politzer on October 28, 1902. They soon moved to Vienna, Austria and in 1939 they moved to La Paz, Bolivia to follow their son Otto. They were on one of the last passenger boats across the Atlantic. After the war they moved to New York City. Irene's siblings remaining in Czechoslovakia all perished in the Holocaust, as did all of Julius's siblings other than his sister Elza. These are their stories.

Wilma wrote that March 9, 1942 would always remain indelibly in her mind, as this was the day the family first heard the alarming news that Jewish men and women would be transported to Poland. They believed that the Germans would be capable of doing this, but could not comprehend how they could have conceived of such a cruel idea. Rumours were flying, one of them being that only unmarried people would be deported. As a result an unprecedented epidemic of weddings started, although only on the most modest scale and without guests. People who had grown middle-aged as bachelors, as well as teenagers, plus men and women who had not yet found the right life partners, now married the next door neighbour, an office colleague or a fleeting acquaintance in a hurry. There was even a grim little joke that fathers would remember these "good times" when they got rid of their daughters easily and without a dowry. Two weeks later on March 21, the first transports of men were arranged. Hlinka guardsmen (the militia established from 1938 to 1945 by the Slovak People's Party) went out in the early morning from one Jewish house to the next and left summonses for selected men, mostly young unmarried men, but also several married men. Each was told that they could take along 30 kg (64 lbs) of luggage and that they were to work in Poland. Some of them hoped and believed that this would really be the case, but most of them were extremely apprehensive and worried about what might be awaiting them.

On March 21<sup>st</sup> Ernest Knoepfelmacher (son of Elsa Politzer) was also taken from Trenčín, Slovakia. Ernest (Erno) was the big brother of Steve (now Haim Klement) (the family's last "Knoepfelmacher" meant "button-maker"). The night before, a friend had let Erno see the list of men who would be taken the next morning. Erno's name was not on it and he therefore refused to follow the advice of his mother and go to visit with Wilma and Dori in Dolný Kubín for a week or so. During the night however, somebody apparently drew straws to put Erno's name on the ominous list because the next morning there was a summons for him with an order to be in the town square in two hours with his luggage. Aunt Elsa never forgave herself that she did not direct the cab driver to take Erno to the railroad station instead of to the town square, and Erno himself was too straight-thinking as to do something other than that which was ordered. After all, he was in his prime, 27 years old, in very fit condition, and in spite of the reigning anxiety he was more or less confident that he could ride out the war in some way in Poland.

and then return. Later there were a few postcards from Majdanek, one of the most notorious concentration camps, saying how glad he was that his mother and little brother Steve, then 7 years old, were not with him. After the war the family learned that in the November 1943 revolt of the inmates in the notorious Majdanek concentration camp, all inmates had been killed within the span of 3 days.

On March 28, the first girls' transports were arranged and soon after, it was discovered for what purpose. The brothels for soldiers on the war front were filled with young women and if one got pregnant, she was simply "liquidated". These were just the first beginnings of deportations, and soon more efficient ways of gathering deportees was found. An assembling camp was established in Žilina, Slovakia in dilapidated barracks left over from WWI, where trainloads of people were brought and then gathered into transports.

At that time, Wilma in Dolný Kubín heard that in Bratislava, along the Váh valley and in the Eastern part of the country, whole communities were being taken in one fell swoop, although it was difficult to believe. In the meantime, the so-called Yellow Identification Cards came, which were actually work permits stating that the named person was needed in his type of work and therefore he and his family should not be deported. An unbelievable scramble for the yellow cards started. They had been in preparation when the first transports had started, and Elsa was disconsolate when Erno's yellow card arrived by mail a week after his deportation. Not only would it have prevented Erno's deportation, but it also would have protected Elsa and Steve.

In mid-April Wilma and Dori received a special delivery letter from Elsa, asking Dori to come right away. On Sunday, April 19 he made the trip to Trenčín and Elsa took him through her last arrangements (the location of her last will, and the fact that Wilma would be the executor of her personal property and furniture factory if something happened to her). As it turned out, although Elsa expected a yellow card in her own name, which hadn't yet arrived, she was able to escape deportation that Monday by relying on Erno's yellow card.

Also in Trenčín at that time was Arnold, the youngest brother of Wilma's father Julius Politzer. He had been in an executive position in a bank in Vienna when the Germans took Austria, and so he retired and went to Fiume, Italy (later Rieka, Croatia after the annexation) with his wife Hermi, where they received a pension from the Hungarian-based bank. They felt very lonely in Fiume however, and figured they would be better off together with Arnold's brothers and sisters in Slovakia. Therefore they left Fiume in late 1940, found a nice apartment in Trenčín and settled down. When the deportations started however, they despaired over their decision to leave Fiume. When Dori left Elsa on April 19, 1942, he next visited Arnold and Hermi and found them sitting in their kitchen on their already-

packed suitcases, in deep despair and looking as though no chairs existed. Dirty dishes were all around and laundry was hanging everywhere. The always meticulous Hermi threw up her hands and said that nothing was worth doing anymore. They were not covered by a yellow card since Arnold was retired and therefore they knew what they could expect. When Dori returned home, he talked about the apathetic state that Arnold and Hermi were in, and how bloated Hermi's face was. Hermi told Dori that she had made covered buttons out of gold coins, sewn onto her blouse with the hope that the proceeds would carry them through difficult times. By the time Dori returned home on Sunday night, Arnold and Hermi had already been taken away.

At about the same time, in Považská Bystrica, Slovakia, there was a district commissioner named Shurman, who Wilma said was an especially evil man. It was his zealousness which caused the entire district to rid itself of all Jewish families in just one day, on April 29, 1942. The procedure at that time was for one transport to leave (ie. one train consisting of 25 box cars, each of which contained exactly 40 people, numbering 1,000 people for easy counting for the Germans). When two neighbouring districts were particularly thorough in cleaning up, they could fill such a train on their own, without having to first send it to the assembling camp in Žilina. These trains went straight to Auschwitz. One such district was Pov. Bystrica, where commissioner Shurman made certain that all of the Jews were taken away. This was the day that the following additional family members were deported:

- Irene Politzer's brother Kalman and his wife Nelly
- Gustav Weiskopf (Sigmund Weiskopf's brother) and his wife Hermine



Pov. Bystrica

As well, Irene (Waldapfel) Politzer's oldest brother Emanuel, his wife Regina and their son Pavel (Paul) were taken the week beforehand to the assembling camp in Žilina. Regina's brother, a resident of Žilina, managed to get the three of them out of camp on a three-week leave. They had to return to the camp when the leave was up but her brother got them out again for a limited time and as a result, they were able to be in and out of the camp during this terrible period of time. Whenever they were in the camp waiting for another leave, there was always the danger of being put onto one of the daily transports. There were small towns or small districts where there were not enough Jews to fill a train and from these places, people were brought into the assembling camp in Žilina and dispatched from there to increase a trainload to 1,000 people. As a result, it was nerve-wracking to be in the camp, as people were called at any time of day or night if additional bodies were needed to fill a train.

Irene Politzer's sister Frida Waldapfel and her son Ernő Waldapfel (who was legless as a result of a train accident ten years earlier) had moved from Pov. Bystrica to Žilina in 1940 and lived in a little rented house. When the transports started, they saw everything going on in the assembling camp since they lived close by. Often they saw people in the assembling camp who they knew well. Frida and Ernő were not sure what would happen to them, as time and again incomplete trains were filled with residents of Žilina. They were lucky for two-and-a-half months but in June 1942 they were finally taken to the camp.

A friend telephoned Wilma and Dori in Dolný Kubín, and Dori took the next train to Žilina to try to intervene on their behalf with the district commissioner, who promised to work on it. However Ernő was the best worker on their case, and highly intelligent. He became acquainted with the German camp inspector (Oberscharführer) who came from Munich, and Ernő told him how grateful he was to Munich since he had received his artificial legs in a renowned clinic there, and had subsequently spent several months there. The Oberscharführer got to like Ernő so much that after five days in the camp, he gave Ernő and Frida an unlimited leave of absence. This meant that they were no longer on the camp's lists, and did not have to return to the camp. At the same time, they were listed on the general registers as having been deported, since they had already been taken from their home. Although they continued to feel like they were in constant danger after their return home, they were not bothered again during the summer.

The situation was different for Emanuel, Frida's brother, whose limited leaves brought him constantly back to the camp with Regina and Pavel. On September 22, the camp administration was short of people to fill a train and finally, they had to go. Regina was murdered upon arrival at Auschwitz but Pavel Waldapfel (subsequently renamed Vitek) survived Auschwitz and his story has been told elsewhere.

In the barracks, the people slept on a thin layer of straw on the floor, one next to another. In July, Julius Politzer's sister Paula and her husband Marcus Schlesinger from Dubnica, together with Julius's sister Juliška and her husband Louis Rosenfeld from Trenčianské Teplice, were brought to the assembling camp. Paula's son Albert managed to get his parents out of the camp the very next day. A cousin intervened for Juliška and her husband, and they were able to get out of the camp as well. Juliška and Louis tried to find a room in Žilina to stay but Paula and Marcus were imprudent enough to return to Dubnica, from which they had been taken in the first place. Sure enough, a month later they were put on a direct transport to Poland.

Although Juliška and Louis lived through several upsetting months in their little room in Žilina, they also spent a lot of time outside their room, often in the attic of friends when there were rumours of another transport being assembled. But they suffered through it all with the intention to endure and survive. In August 1944 when the Slovak uprising against the Germans started, they fled to the woods. At that time however, it rained for weeks and they did not have shelter. Being elderly, they came down from the mountain after spending three cold and rainy November weeks in the woods. They turned themselves in at the police station and were taken to separate concentration camps in Germany, where Louis died and then Juliška succumbed to typhus.

Especially tragic was the fate of Wilma's cousin Alice (Gustav's daughter). Commissioner Shurman in Pov. Bystrica was particularly enraged at Gustav because he surmised that Gustav's son Joseph was serving in the Czechoslovak Army in Great Britain. Joseph flew with Royal Air Force squadron #311 as a navigator. His plane was shot down during his 33<sup>rd</sup> flight in April 1942 and he was buried in a common grave (31-A-11) at the Military Cemetery in Bergan op Zoom, Netherlands. This was the reason that, even after Gustav and Hermine's deportation, Shurman wanted to find Alice, who had been one of the March 1942 brides and was living in another district. In July, his digging proved successful, and Alice and her husband were deported even though he had excellent protection with a yellow card, working for lumber operations owned by the family of the country's president, Tiso. Tiso, a priest, was the puppet fascist president of the fascist Slovak state, and he was tried and hung after the war. At about the same time, the first letters were received by Wilma and Dori from Poland. About Paula's son his wife wrote: "... my dear late Paul...". This was the first they heard authentically what was happening. This Paul's wife, Hedy, was one of the two members of the family who returned after three horrible years in Auschwitz. All the others perished.

Also in early March of 1942, Dori and Wilma brought Dori's mother Malvina Weiskopf to live with them in Dolný Kubin. Their rented house consisted of a spacious entrance, one bedroom and a living room. Dori, Wilma, Lucy and Rena all slept together in the bedroom and the living room became Malvina's room. There was no outdoor plumbing (only an outhouse) or hot water, and the only heat came from a ceramic stove in the hallway entrance. Malvina had diabetes but had to eat whatever was available. She decided that she should convert to Catholicism before she died. She worked hard to convince the local priest that she should be converted and that she should be buried in the local Catholic cemetery. Ultimately, she was successful. In conversations later in life, Wilma, Lucy and Rena came to the conclusion that having seen the Jews of Koppany and Dolný Kubin being cleaned out, she wanted to do whatever it took to protect her son and his family. Her decision was just in time as on June 5<sup>th</sup>, July 26<sup>th</sup> and July 31<sup>st</sup>, 93 Jewish families were deported from Dolný Kubin. She passed away in Dolný Kubin on February 20, 1943 at the age of 71 from complications due to her diabetes. She is buried there under the name of Malvina Valentinova.

In September 1942 when the war fortunes seemed to take a turn, the situation eased a bit and Dori was hired back into the government service on a temporary basis; however he was transferred to a faraway district in a very small town in underdeveloped surroundings. He accepted the position although he had to leave Wilma and the girls behind in Dolný Kubin for the time being. When he arrived in Giraltovce, he found that there was no possibility of finding an apartment as there were none available, so he started a routine of traveling the six-hour trip home to Dolný Kubin every other Saturday and returning on Sunday evening to Giraltovce once again. This continued all through 1943 and the first half of 1944.

### **The Middle (1944)**

In 1944, in the face of the German retreat in front of the oncoming Russians, Dori's office received orders to prepare for evacuation from Giraltovce. His office's destination was to be Velká Bytča. Dori wrote to Wilma that the family should be together as the situation grew more serious. This was the first time that Lucy felt fear. One day she noticed that there were four packed rucksacks behind one of the doors in the house – 2 big ones and 2 little one – one for each member of the family. On asking Wilma whether they were going on a trip, she was told that they might have to leave their home. Lucy still didn't fully understand what was going on, but the fear of having to leave her home stayed with her.

Shortly afterwards, Dori suggested that Wilma travel with the girls to Bytca and try to rent a furnished room for the family. Immediately she took the girls and went, as so often before, to visit Aunt Frida and Erno in Žilina, with a plan to use half a day of the visit for aside trip to Bytca.

On August 28, 1944 at 5:00 in the morning, Wilma boarded a train with then 8-year-old Lucy and 6-year-old Rena in Dolný Kubín, but even before they arrived at the transfer point of Kralovany, they heard loud detonations. At the station in Kralovany they heard that partisans had made a surprise attack on the little spa in Lubochňa where German soldiers were convalescing. The partisans had asked for and received canons from the obliging Slovak officers in the nearby garrison of Ružomberok. Wilma was impressed with the partisans' boldness and continued the trip, arriving in Žilina at 8 a.m. In the afternoon she was overjoyed to meet with Aunt Elsa and her son Steve at Aunt Juliska's house. Since September of 1942, Elsa and Steve had been in a so-called "work" camp in Sered, Slovakia. They had gone there voluntarily to avoid deportation to Poland which, according to the behaviour of the man who took Elza's furniture factory, could be expected any day now. In late summer of 1942, it was not easy to get into this work camp because many people had already figured out that it gave an ever-so-slight chance to avoid deportation. Elsa's nephew Erno Spitzer had been sent to this camp several months earlier and by now had acquired a leading position in the camp administration. As a result, he was able to help Elsa enter the camp with Steve. She was sent to the sewing workshop and worked there for the duration of her stay.

The conditions in this camp were changing with the changing fortunes of the war and some Slovaks started to view the Jews more like their own (after all, they had never really liked the Germans). In June 1944, Elsa did not feel well, as the nervous tension of barracks living together with the general uncertainty made her very ill. She sought and was granted a three-week leave from Sered camp. At



that time it had become clear that with the approaching front line, big changes would be happening and in this case it was preferable to be flexible and be outside the camp rather than inside, where nobody knew what might happen next. So Elsa delayed her vacation departure, uncertain whether or not she was doing the right thing and becoming more nervous each day. At last, on August 27 she decided that the time to leave the camp had come and with just a few things packed for their “vacation”, she and Steve headed to Žilina. It turned out that she timed things perfectly, as the Slovak uprising began the very next day.

Wilma met Elsa at Aunt Juliška’s house. Aunt Juliška was confident that the front line was approaching fast and there was nothing to be worried about anymore. In contrast, Wilma and Elsa were in a very depressed and nervous mood and could not be persuaded by Aunt Juliška’s optimism. When they parted, Elsa headed to a rented furnished room and Wilma to Aunt Frida’s house, where she was staying. The next morning Wilma took a half-hour train ride to Velka Bytca and the veterinarian Dr. Muller (an old boyfriend of Irene Politzer) took her around town to look for lodging. None were found, and Wilma returned to Žilina by train that afternoon.

At the station in Žilina, Wilma heard that there were to be no more trains to Kralovany (the track used for going home to Dolny Kubin). Apparently the main tunnel had been blown up by the partisans in order to cut off the route for the German military transports. That presented a problem, as how were Wilma and the girls to leave Žilina? Wilma walked through town to Aunt Frida’s house, a good half hour walk from the main railroad station. When passing the barracks she saw a lot of civilians on the grounds of the barracks – an unusual sight – and workers hurrying to the barracks from all sides to voluntarily join the uprising. It was clear that the partisans together with other insurgents had taken over the barracks as well as the town. That would have been good news had Wilma not seen on her trip to Bytca (within 20 minutes from Žilina) a long train with German soldiers, cannons, tanks and equipment. When she came home and reported to Ernő what she had seen, he also became anxious. His old friend Jenő Buchler was also there but just leaving, and promised to provide further reports on the situation.

Wilma paced the room – she could not sit down and did not know what to do. Single shots could be heard from town but nobody knew who was shooting. Towards evening, Evka (Dr. Laszlo’s housekeeper, who after his deportation had stayed with Aunt Frida and was working in town) came home and brought a message from Jenő Buchler for Aunt Frida and Ernő to be ready since it might be necessary to leave town during the night. Ernő had the foresight months before to rent a small apartment in a village about 10 miles from Žilina for himself, his mother and another couple – Dr. Singer and his wife – to withdraw to if things became uncomfortable in Žilina.

Everyone was unable to get much sleep that night. At 5 a.m. everyone got dressed and at 6:30 the Singers arrived with knapsacks on their backs to pick up Aunt Frida and Ernő. Aunt Frida quickly packed the things that were needed, rolling up two blankets, taking 2 or 3 pots, some underthings and linen. Everything else was left in the rented house.

Wilma and the children were in a precarious situation and she didn't know how to get through town with the continuous sound of gunfire. They had to get back to the Orava district but Wilma didn't know how long the disturbance would last and she and the girls had only the lightest summer clothes with them, rain jackets and no blankets. Dr. Singer advised that he had seen that the trains were still moving on the small railroad connecting the main station with the small station nearby. Wilma looked up the timetable, saw that the next train was due in 15 minutes from that nearby barracks station and got the girls ready as fast as she could. They left quickly, worrying that it was the last time they would ever see Aunt Frida or Ernő, and in fact it was.

They ran towards the barracks station. It was 7 a.m., the train was ready to leave, they jumped on as it started and away it went. Since this particular railroad line circumvented the town, they got to the main station without incident but of course didn't have any train to get them home through the bombed tunnel. As well, the main station was being closed down as they pondered what to do, with no more trains set to leave or arrive. There they stood, the shooting becoming more intense. Wilma decided that there was no choice but to start walking in the direction of Dolný Kubín (first to Varín, then to Terchová, Zázrivá and finally to Kubín). They began walking towards the outskirts of Žilina, along the railroad tracks, past the last of the buildings and finally out into the open. Suddenly there was a burst of machine gun fire directly towards them and others walking the same way, coming from the water tower of the cellulose factory at the edge of town. German soldiers had barricaded themselves in the factory and were determined to harass everyone moving on the road.

In front of her, Wilma saw railway workers taking cover by throwing themselves on the ground, so she, Lucy and Rena all did the same. Then, bent over, they crossed the tracks in a hurry and took cover in high grass on the other side of the somewhat elevated tracks. Wilma and the girls did the same, figuring that the railway workers were probably former soldiers and knew what they were doing. But what next? Should they return to town to Aunt Juliška who lived near the main train station? There was still continuous shooting in town.

Wilma was undecided and they all walked slowly back towards town where they met a Bulgarian gardener from Ružomberok who often brought his wares to Kubín and knew Wilma quite well as his customer. He stopped them and told them that they should not dream of returning to town and that they had to pass

the cellulose factory at any cost and try to get home with him. So they turned around again and the 6 and 8 year old Rena and Lucy cried out of fear of being shot at but when they came into the street once more, the shooting seemed to have diminished. Everyone hurried through the open space with just sporadic firing, came to the railroad bridge over the river Váh, and found that this seemed to be the new shooting target from the tower. Bent over, they ran as fast as they could on the narrow planks next to the railroad track over the bridge. Looking back on the experience while being interviewed for the Shoah Foundation, Lucy said that this was one of the most terrifying experiences for her.

Behind the bridge it was more comfortable, as this was the domain of the partisans. There was the sound of cannons shooting towards Žilina, and Wilma was grateful that the gardener had almost forced them to come along with him. Varin, the town towards which they headed, was six miles away and when they arrived, the last bus was getting ready to leave to Terchova (a village in the mountains which led towards the Orava district, their final destination).

In Terchova, a number of people who wanted to get home to different parts of the country joined Wilma in hiring a peasant with his manure cart. With two heavy horses pulling the load, everyone lined up on the cart like swallows on a wire, with feet dangling next to the wheels. In Zázrivá, Wilma persuaded the peasant, for the right price, to take them over the next two mountains to the Orava district. When they reached the Orava River, everyone got off the cart and people began looking for other means to get to their various destinations. Wilma and the girls were lucky once again, as a farmer's wagon stopped and took them all the way to Kubin. There were no trains running on the railroad to Kubin either, so they were grateful for the opportunity. And how relieved they were to finally be home again!

Wilma and the girls arrived home on Wednesday evening. On Saturday, they heard alarming news about pressure from the north. On Sunday the news was more concrete: the Germans were pushing down from Poland and having taken Trstena, were going for Tvrdošín.

## **A Reunion**

When Wilma asked Dori for directives during the early summer, he told her to be prepared to act on her own and on the spur of the moment, according to the situation. Ernest (Erno) had also advised Wilma to stay flexible and do what was right at any given moment. As a result, she had become used to thinking about herself and the girls independently from Dori and on Sunday, September 2, 1944, she decided that they must leave Dolny Kubin. Each of them carried a knapsack and Wilma also carried 3 blankets. Everyone wore wool sweaters and coats, and the girls also had hand-made leather boots which helped to protect their feet from the cold and the wet in the months to come. Wilma and Dori had clearly planned for a very long time, in terms of what they would need if they ever had to run. The apartment was left in absolute order. Dori had spoken with Mr. Albini in Leštiny months before, asking for shelter for Wilma and the children should it become necessary for them to leave Kubin, and he had agreed.

As a result, Wilma and the girls headed for Leštiny, with an eye on the possibility of getting to the Liptov (south, and away from the oncoming Germans). Across the street, Dr. Kačaluba was getting ready to visit a patient by car and he agreed to take them with him to Leštiny. When they had locked the apartment and crossed the street to join Dr. Kačaluba, Lucy asked "Where are we going Mami?" to which Wilma responded "We are going into the wide, wide world". Wilma never forgot Lucy's wide scared eyes in response.

In Leštiny, the Albini's took everyone in as promised. That afternoon, Mr. Albini headed into Kubin to hear the news (or at least the rumours). On his return that afternoon he had news that the Germans had taken Tvrdošín and were pushing south. Wilma realized that they needed to leave immediately; luckily, Mr. Albini knew just the right person who could help. A farmer from Liptov, Mr. Feherpataky, was in Leštiny that day with his hay wagon drawn by two horses. Because of the rumours, he too wanted to leave right away so that he would be home with his wife if the German's were to occupy his village. Wilma and the girls needed to get south of the Váh River, and this was their opportunity. Up onto the wagon they went, sitting on hay as they wagon drove over the miserable mountain roads through the night. At 4 a.m. they reached the Váh River. They could not see whether the Germans were there guarding the ferry across the river, so Rena and Lucy were hidden in the hay until it was determined that the coast was clear. On the south side of the river everyone continued a further two miles to Mr. Feherpataky's village of Malatiny. After arriving, they found out that the Germans had taken the river at 8 a.m. and controlled the main highway along the river. Had the journey taken any longer, the escape route would have been cut off.

Having slipped into the partisan district at the last moment, Wilma and the girls arrived at the Feherpataky's house in Malatiny, which was comparatively quiet to everything before. They were only two miles from the German-held road but as Wilma said, "[those] two miles were the most miserable road I had ever seen and this may have convinced the Germans of the unimportance of anything that would be located at such as road". To the north of Malatiny, on the highway, the Germans were driving up and down; however to the south of Malatiny and up into the mountains stretched the domain of the partisans – insurgent Slovaks with their quickly designated capital of Banská Bystrica.

Mr. and Mrs. Feherpataky were both in their 60's, childless farmers who worked their fields and had animals. The very first day when it became known in the village that the Germans were just two miles away, the villagers in great excitement loaded their wagons with featherbeds and blankets, and drove with their families as far into the mountains as they could. Mr. and Mrs. Feherpataky were just as alarmed and took Wilma and the girls with them on their wagon. Up the mountain road they went, far into the woods, and everyone bedded down in the featherbeds under the trees. Luckily it was the beginning of September and the night was mild. The next morning some of the villagers went reconnoitering and found that their village was empty and untouched. As a result, everyone sheepishly returned to Malatiny, but as fast friends since everyone bonded on their night out together.

The tiny old log cabin home belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Feherpataky had a small entrance room with three doors, one into the bedroom, one into the kitchen and one into the adjoining small barn. The couple insisted that Wilma and the girls move into their bedroom, and they stuffed mattresses for themselves with straw from the barn and remained out there for the rest of the stay. They were quite poor and did not have much food. As a result, Wilma took the girls for an hour-and-a-half walk over a mountain to the small town of Nemecká Lupča, as she had heard that the partisans were giving some food to refugees. There was hustle and bustle in town, full of partisans in civilian clothes with their weapons, as well as in uniform. One of the partisans distributed food to refugees and seemed especially compassionate because he had a little girl who was Lucy's age. They later found out that he was from Malatiny (Bernát) and that he had recognized Wilma and the girls from the night beforehand in the mountains. He gave them a big piece of bacon and half a salami and they were overjoyed to return to Mr. and Mrs. Feherpataky with such a windfall, which improved everyone's diet for days. In addition, Wilma paid Mr. and Mrs. Feherpataky for their room.

They had arrived in Malatiny on September 4, 1944 and began living as Mr. and Mrs. Feherpataky did – spending some nights with them in their potato dugout when shooting could be heard but generally Wilma just tried to keep house and prepare meals when they went into the fields, often taking the girls with them. Rena later remembered digging for potatoes and having potato salad for dinner. They settled into a routine but all the while, Wilma was wondering and worrying about Dori, and whether or not they would ever see him again.

On the morning of September 20<sup>th</sup>, Dori walked into the house. This was a moment that they would never forget. He held onto Wilma and the girls as if he would never let go. He told them that when he arrived in Leštiny looking for everyone, he was told that they might still be in Malatiny and so he hurried and hoped that they would still be there. Then, he told his story of the time leading up to their joyful reunion.

The general staff of the Slovak, German-leaning army, had been stationed in Giraltovec throughout the summer, with two Slovak divisions under their command. At all German requests to send some of these troops to aid the Germans on the Russian front, the general staff refused, saying that with the front line as close as it was, they wanted their troops to be ready to defend their own country. It was clear from this that the Slovak military did not wish to help the retreating Germans, and a great number of their staff in Giraltovec was either aware or informed of the imminent uprising and prepared for a change-over at the right moment from loyalty to Slovakia, to loyalty to Czechoslovakia. Dori knew about the efforts of the Czechoslovak-thinking officers since he was meeting socially with a great number of them. But at the last moment, on August 28<sup>th</sup> (when Wilma saw the start of the uprising in Žilina), the efforts of these military men in Eastern Slovakia were obstructed by treason to the Germans, who came in great force, overwhelming and disarming the two divisions and sending the soldiers home. Then the Germans started their own ruling of this region, close to the approaching front line.

Dori knew that he'd better be out of sight, and he retreated to a small village in his district. But after a few days, when he heard rumours of what the Germans did in Western Slovakia, he decided that he had to join Wilma and the girls at any price and he set off on the long way to Kubin. This was a risky undertaking, but he was determined. Back in Giraltovec, he told his boss (the district commissioner), that he intended to be with his family. This man immediately decided to join Dori, since his family also had not followed him to Giraltovec and instead lived in Nové Mesto and Váhom. So the two men took the train westward together, however after about a 4 hour ride the train was stopped in Ružomberok because the tunnel nearby had been blown up.

The entire train full of travellers had to get off and they were taken under German guard into town, wondering what was going to happen next. They were marched to the school and herded into the school yard with the gate locked behind them. Then they noticed the black uniforms of the Gestapo all around them. Dori's travel companion's heart was sinking when he noticed, and Dori did not feel very comfortable either. But then he took his commissioner in tow and went to one of the Gestapo officers. He spoke German quite well and so he identified himself and the commissioner as Slovak government officials (of course not mentioning that he was of Jewish descent) and asked for a pass to get out. They were taken into the office and given a one hour pass, in order that they could get some witnesses as to their trustworthiness. One hour was very little time, so they hurried to a colleague of Dori's from his student days, a veterinarian and German national who lived and worked in Ružomberok. As they walked past a large coffee house, Dori saw his colleague inside, sitting with the province's governor, who he also knew and who was now a major and in German uniform. They went in and asked for his papers to be signed by these witnesses. With this document attesting to his reliability and that of the commissioner, they headed back to the Gestapo headquarters and received a pass with exact directions from which they would be allowed to leave town. They were told to not try to leave from anywhere else, as they would be shot. Grateful for the pass and instructions, they hurried away on the designated route and then parted, with the commissioner heading west and Dori heading north.

Most such travel had to be done on foot although if one was lucky, a peasant might come along with an oxcart and offer a ride. When Dori arrived in Kubin and saw that Wilma had left everything in perfect order without trying to bring things from the apartment, he became mad at the situation which had forced his family out of their home, and he decided to leave as little as possible for the Germans to find and take. He worked day and night for two days, packing and taking things to be stored with good friends who were willing to help. He hired a wagon with horses and throughout one night he stored away their bedding, mattresses, linens and clothing. On the third day in the early morning, just before the Germans occupied Kubin, he left for Leštiny in the hopes of finding the family there. Later, he heard that two hours after he had left Kubin, the Germans were looking for him at the family's rented house, likely on someone's denunciation. Although Dori didn't look traditionally Jewish like Wilma (he had high Slavic cheekbones and blue eyes), there were people who knew of his background and were clearly looking to court favour.

In Leštiny Dori heard that Wilma and the girls had left more than two weeks prior for Malatiny, so he followed their trail and on September 20<sup>th</sup>, walked into the Feherpataky's house. It was unbelievably wonderful for the family to be together again. Everyone lived a quiet rural life with Wilma taking care of the house and kitchen for everyone and Dori doing a bit of veterinary work in the

village. They heard and saw the swarms of Allied planes, 200 or more at one time, on their way from Italy on bombing missions to Poland. They loved following the planes with their eyes, so high in the sky that they were just tiny dots. They could hear a faint hum when the plans were approaching, and ran out to see them and cheer them on. From time to time however, they could also hear shooting, sometimes over a hill and sometimes closer by, as the Germans did their best to liquidate the partisans. Malatiny was luckily so unimportant, and the road there a blind alley, that the Germans did not venture into the village.





*Wilma & Dori – 1947  
(Lpt. Sv. Mikuláš)*



*Elsa (Politzer) Knoepfelmacher, Rena, Elsa's son  
Steve Knoepfelmacher (Klement) and Lucy – 1946  
(Lpt. Sv. Mikuláš)*

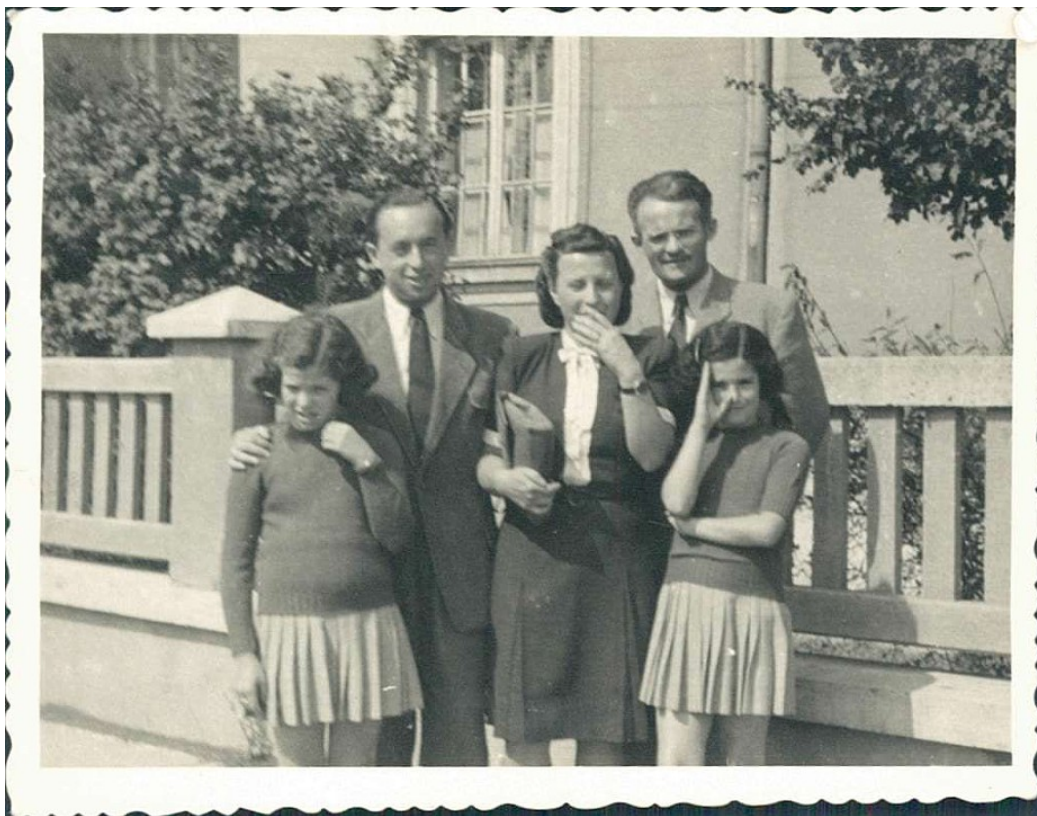


*Julius Politzer (Wilma's father), Lucy, Rena & Irene Politzer (Wilma's mother)  
(early 1939 – Just before the departure of Julius & Irene for Bolivia)  
(Vienna, Austria)*



*Lucy & Rena with Mr. & Mrs. Feherpataky after the war – 1946; Malatiny*





*Lucy, Pavel (Palo or "Paul") Vitek (son of Emanuel Politzer & wife Regina),  
Palo's wife Aranka, Dori & Rena [both Palo and Aranka  
survived Auschwitz]; 1947 (Lpt. Sv. Mikuláš)  
[both Lucy and Rena were wearing clothing from America, sent after the  
war from Grossmama Irene Politzer]*



*Gustav (Gusti) Politzer (Julius Politzer's brother) – centre front row  
Gustav's wife Hermine is to his right (to his left are possibly Nelly and Lolo)  
Jozko (Josef) and Alice are standing in the rear  
(1931)*



*Photo taken at Tivoli (Vienna) the day before the wedding of Wilma Politzer and Theodor Weiskopf (Valentin) [L-R: Aunt Frida (died Auschwitz Sept. 1944), Irene Politzer, Julius Politzer, Malvina (Rotter) Weiskopf, Zeno Weiskopf, unknown, Aranka Weiskopf with son Heinz (died 1942), Sigmund Weiskopf, Geza Weiskopf and wife Gertl, Teodor Valentin, Wilma Politzer and Max Bloch (husband of Aranka Weiskopf)]*





*Alice Politzer, Franzi, Wilma & Erno Knoepfelmacher -1940 (Trencin Teplice)*





Nine Pclitzer siblings. From left, front: Paula, Elza, Juliška, Irma, Berti; back: guest?, Arnold, Samuel, son of Irma Ernest Spitzer, Gusti, Julius

*The only two Politzer siblings who survived the war  
were Julius and Elza*



*Lucy & Rena – 1944 (before leaving Dolny Kubin)*

### **Moving On**

In spite of the relative safety of Malatiny, the family began to feel worried and uncertain since the Germans were too close for comfort, and they half expected a German sortie to stop in the village. As a result, they began to think about moving on, away from the German occupied territory to an area occupied by the partisans. The goal was Banská Bystrica, but getting there was not very simple. At that time all kinds of references were needed to receive a pass into partisan territory, in order to prevent infiltrators from entering the area.

But at last they got the necessary passes and on October 19<sup>th</sup>, Mr. Feherpataky hitched his horses to a wagon and, while it was raining buckets, drove them up the mountain path to the tiny spa of Železno, where he dropped them off and headed home. Železno was filled with Czechoslovak-minded soldiers, refugees and partisans, but somehow they managed to find a place to stay for the night. The next day, they were able to get to Osada where they spent the night sitting up at the tiny bus station in the hopes of getting an early morning bus to Banská Bystrica. Rena became very sick during the night and when the bus arrived and she was loaded into her coat to get on the bus, she fainted away with an apologetic smile. But they had no choice and had to get on the bus; luckily she recovered sufficiently during the bus ride so as to be all right.

When they arrived in the main square in Banská Bystric, they were in the midst of disembarking and taking off their knapsacks when an old acquaintance from Kubin walked by, a high school teacher and a member of the underground named Lettrich. His first words were "Get lost here as fast as you can, we'll have to capitulate in a few days". This was some welcome! They had to find some lodging in the meantime, which was an impossible task since the town was so crowded with temporary Czechoslovak government offices, the army, partisans and refugees. They found miserable lodgings far from town in Radvany, on Saturday evening just before dark.

Sunday passed, then Monday, and on Tuesday the general flight began. On Wednesday they could see people with knapsacks and blankets heading in the general direction of the lower Tatra mountains, and army trucks took along anyone who asked. Quite alarmed, they packed their bags and made some purchases and on Thursday they headed out in a hired farmer's wagon with a young couple named Stangl and their baby boy, who they knew from Kubin. They had heard that the Czechoslovak army would hold out against the Germans in the mountains until the Red Army arrived on their westward drive. As a result, they followed the Czechoslovak army.

They spent the night at a farmer's house and then continued the next morning, Friday, October 27, 1944. The narrow road was packed with military vehicles and civilians on foot, in cars and in trucks, and it did not take long until the first German airplanes appeared in the sky overhead. The long columns presented an excellent target for air attacks and there was terrible confusion made all the worse by the occasional stalled car which stopped traffic entirely. They saw soldiers leaping from their vehicles with each wave of airplanes and running into the woods on either side of the road, and so they did the same.

They arrived in Staré Hory at 1 p.m. and had to find a vehicle and look for food. Dori left Wilma and the girls standing in the town square and went exploring for food. After he left, Wilma heard and then saw low flying airplanes approaching. She looking around and saw the entrance to a basement in a 200 year old house nearby. Grabbing the girls, she raced with them into the basement along with many others seeking shelter. In the meantime, Dori had noticed an army kitchen in the school yard. At the same time however, he also heard the airplanes and headed towards a nearby cellar. A number of soldiers were crowding the entrance to the cellar however, and the planes were almost overhead, so Dori leaped into the open door of the house and ran to the back of the corridor. It was just in time, as the bombs started falling as he headed inside. 14 feet from the door, splinters from the bombs hit him, one in his right cheek and another in his chest area. Luckily he was wearing his heavy leather coat. Although the splinter was visible, the coat protected him from a deep wound. After the attack he headed outside and was startled to see that three of the soldiers who had been trying to get into the cellar were lying dead in their blood near the door. There were also dead horses lying in the square. He returned to find Wilma and the girls in the square, badly shaken and without food. They then headed to the military hospital to have the splinter removed from his chest, and there he collapsed in shock. It took quite some time until he recovered sufficiently to be able to get up, and the family wasn't able to leave town until hours later. As for the splinter in his cheek, it was not removed and it showed through his skin until he died six years later.

It was getting dark. An abandoned farmer's cart was standing by the edge of the road but there was no horse. The Stangl couple and their little boy were with them, and Mr. Stangl went out looking for and found a horse. These horses without masters were mainly army horses, as some soldiers left their wagons and horses and went home as the army dissolved. Dori and Mr. Stangl harnessed the horse to the cart and Mrs. Stangl, her baby, and Lucy and Rena were all loaded in, with a tarpaulin over top of them. They headed off in the direction of the general retreat as it got dark and started to rain.

By the time they found a second horse for the cart it was pouring relentlessly. Mr. Stangl walked with the horses, holding the reins, and Dori and Wilma walked behind the cart. Thus they continued for hours and hours through the night. Though they were well equipped for bad weather, the continuous rain slowly worked its way through the seams of their gear and they were soaked to the bone. The road went steadily uphill and they had the feeling that it would never stop. Then, at around 5 a.m., they reached Donovaly. The little summer resort was filled with soldiers but they didn't care – they barged into a farmer's house where about 10-12 camp beds were filled with soldiers resting or sleeping. They took off the girls' coats, dried the girls off, took off their shoes and then laid the children on a couple of the beds at the feet of soldiers.

They were glad that the horrible night had ended but at 6 a.m. an orderly came to report to the house sergeant that the Germans had reached Staré Hory and that some of the Czechoslovak commanding officers housed in the hotel at Donovaly had disappeared during the night, heading home. The house sergeant then opened two big cases, one with cigarettes and another with sugared coffee cubes, manufactured especially for fast coffee for the army. He distributed these staples and told his men that they were free to go home if they wished. He himself was going to join the Czechoslovak army in the mountains. The men deliberated briefly and then left, one part following the sergeant and the rest heading home.

Wilma and Dori and the girls got dressed again and headed out into the dreary half-light of an early morning and cloudy sky. From Donovaly there were no real roads leading further up, only foot paths which were so mired in mud after the long rains and thousands of people travelling over them that it was very difficult to get anywhere. The rain had stopped but all of the vehicles and people had created a wide, muddy, endless track over the meadows. Feet became stuck in the black mud with every step and their horse fell to his knees, sliding on the slippery ground. The wagon sank in to the nave. But ahead they went, up past a gigantic army tent which was two stories high and about 70 feet wide. The tent was a warehouse which had been placed into the improbable space by the Czechoslovak leaning officers of the "Slovak" army, while planning the uprising. They had put several such enormous warehouses with the most needed staples and other supplies up in the mountains, with the hope of being able to hold the territory until the Russian front fought its way past. This plan did not work out since the Germans were hot on the heels of everyone, and Wilma and Dori could see that the warehouse guards were giving away their stockpiles to anyone asking for it. So they went in and saw the warehouse literally being taken apart and carried away by people heading up in to the mountains. People took blankets, tent covers, 50 lb. bags of rice, flour, big wooden boxes filled with cigarettes, and boxes with army coffee (coffee cubes with sugar added to them). There were car tires, big boxes of matches and even 100 lb. bags of sugar lying on the soggy ground. They would have loved to have taken some additional supplies with them

but their horse had difficulty pulling what he already had, so they just took some coffee cubes and rice, and kept on going.

About 1½ miles from Donovaly they came through a tiny community, Polianka, and then pulled on through and back into the forest. There were abandoned civilian cars, trucks, and military vehicles which had been driven behind and around the trees in order to make it impossible for the Germans to ever use those vehicles again.

Finally, when they saw that they could not continue with their horse or wagon any further, they took their most important things from the wagon and returned to Polianka. The 12 to 15 homes in this tiny community were filled with people but a much greater number walked on past the village and up into the mountains. Wilma and Dori found shelter, along with the Stengl family, in the neat home of a bachelor in whose big bedroom he had already placed two families. At last they had a chance to dry their coats and shoes, however the rain continued for 4 more days and during that time the Germans reached Donovaly.

### **Kalište**

This was followed by an order from the municipal office in Donovaly that all civilians in all surrounding hamlets and in Donovaly itself were to leave and return to their home communities. Everyone was given 2 days to leave. The order stated that nobody should be afraid and that nothing would happen to anyone, but people were terrified and didn't know what to do. The first thing which Wilma and Dori thought of was Mitzi, Lucy's godmother who lived in Zvolen, but they didn't want to pass through Staré Hory again as Wilma felt particularly miserable about the place. As a result, they had to walk over the mountain to another valley and then make their way to the train from there. They hired two women to lead them and to help with their bags of food over the mountain and to the next village. The Stangl family did not want to leave their shelter due to their small baby, so they stayed behind in Polianka. On November 1<sup>st</sup>, the first day with no rain, Wilma and Dori and the girls left and about 3 hours later arrived in Kalište, where the guide women put their bags down in front of a little chapel and then headed for home. Lucy and Rena stayed with Wilma and the bags while Dori went to look for lodging for the night. He came back after an hour, having not found anything. He headed out again and this time Wilma was able to watch him walk unsuccessfully from door to door. Finally, at the second-to-last house, located at the highest point in the village, he found space for them. As he picked them up, he murmured "Cislo 13, Pánboh pri nás" (Number 13, the Lord is with us).

The house was located at the highest point in the village. It consisted of one room and a tiny kitchen, and was part of a three-family building. At Dori's urgent imploring for shelter, he had been offered and took the space on the floor between the stove and the door for the one night that they intended to stay. The farmer's wife gave them some home woven rungs for spreading on the floor and they lay down to sleep. There was another couple in the one available bed in the room beside where the farmer lived, and the couple received news the following day that people following the Polianka summons to return to their domicile were being picked up in the trains and taken by the Gestapo. As a result, Wilma and Dori decided to stay for another day or two, which is how the family's long stay in Kalište started.

Veranda	Neighbour #1			
	Neighbour #2			
	Kitchen	Stove	Russian Partisans	
	Sofa	(1.5 metres of sleeping space on the floor for the Valentin family)		
	Beds	Beds	Open Veranda	
	Table	Sewing Machine		
	Windows			



The farmer's price for his floor space was Kčs 25 per person per night, which converted to Kčs 100 per night for the family. When Dori had trouble finding lodging on the first day he agreed to this price for the one night but as they stayed on, the price remained the same even though there was just a narrow floor space of 1.5 metres available for the entire family. On reflection, Lucy said that Dori must have spent years preparing for the possibility of having to run during the war, as the family was prepared with enough cash to buy food and shelter throughout the rest of the war. All four of them had to lie down in the same direction (ie. Rena on her left side facing the stove, Lucy on her left side spooning Rena, and behind them in the same position both Wilma and Dori). It was hard to turn over to the other side but they must have figured out a way to do it as some mornings they woke up facing the door instead of the oven. As well, each night they wore all of their clothing (except for their boots), both for warmth and so that they would be ready to run into the woods on a moment's notice if the alarm bell was sounded in the night. The farmer's wife provided home woven rugs which Wilma spread out on the floor every evening, and the family put their knitted things under their heads to serve as pillows. The blankets were the excellent wool blankets which the family had brought with them but even so, they were just blankets and Dori often woke up in the night chilled to the bone from the draft coming in the door. Lucy later said that on top of everything else, the winter of 1944/1945 was the coldest and snowiest one in decades.

They stayed and waited one day after another, as rumours of goings-on continued to come up from the valley. Kalište was so high up in the mountains that there was no road, only foot paths. It was about 12 km from the railroad and about 4,000 ft. about sea level. In fact, it was so high that the first snow fell at the beginning of November and it lasted with more snow coming throughout the winter.

Food became more and more of a problem. Wilma and Dori had brought with them one salami, some boxes of sardines, a big piece of flour and lard mixture to make soup with, and from the warehouse in Donovaly and later on Polianka they had taken some sugar and a little rice from abandoned wooden crates. There was also a little aluminum cooking pot and a cooking set for camping which Wilma brought with her everywhere. The pot survived the war and eventually made its way to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. When they arrived in Kalište Dori went looking for food but it was extremely difficult to find anything. The farmers only had as much as they needed for themselves and because the village was so high, they only grew some small potatoes and cabbage. There was no flour for sale, as it had to be brought up from the valley, strapped to the back, on a 3 hour uphill hike. That meant that every farmer baked their own bread but it was not for sale, and potatoes were sold at the exorbitant price of Kčs 25 for 2 pounds. Even that was better than nothing however, as all of the potatoes in town were sold out after a few days. There was a little milk but it was also very expensive as

the pastures were extremely poor at that altitude. During the first three weeks everyone began to starve but they didn't even notice how their clothes were getting bigger and bigger. After a few weeks however, the mountaineers found out that they could earn money by bringing up food supplies from the valley, such as bread, salt and flour. After that, the food situation was a little better.

Kalište turned out to be the retreat of the partisans, as Russian parachutists had retreated to Kalište after the fall of Banská Bystrica and were joined by anti-German Slovak soldiers to form a real partisan community. Its members carried out their actions from Kalište. These did not consist of open battles, as the partisans had only automatic pistols and no canons, machine guns or heavy weapons due to the fact that they were not mobile enough to easily be taken with them. Their tasks were surprise attacks on German troop transports, blowing up important bridges, mining railway tracks at exactly the right moment after being informed by loyal railroaders that a German transport would be passing through. There was never a mistake that a civilian train would have been blown up. They posted sentries on the lower edge of Kalište had a good view of the three possible paths coming up from the valley, and when they saw something suspicious they fired three gunshots into the air in order to warn the partisans in the village. In such a case, the partisans disappeared into the woods surrounding Kalište. The sentries had the task, if possible, to drive away would-be intruders or to at least hold them up until every partisan in the village had disappeared.

Wilma and Dori learned quickly that they had to keep an eye on the partisans. The warning shots were fired too far away for the family to hear since the house was uppermost on the hill, but they could see the partisans with their weapons hurrying along the road in front of their house and towards the woods. On the third or fourth day, Wilma and Dori experienced their first alarm. Everyone dressed in a hurry, grabbed the packed knapsacks waiting by the door, took bread bags and rolled up blankets in their hands, and ran into the deep forest starting 50 steps behind the house. So steep was the approach that the start of the woods, only 50 feet away, was 100 feet higher than the roof of the house.

After running into the woods, they sat down and listened. When they heard dogs barking they were frightened to death that the Germans might be searching the woods with dogs, which they had heard was sometimes the case. After about two hours they heard a man calling to his wife in the distance that Kalište was quiet and she could come down. So they left the woods as well and this was the start of a long string of alarms, which in the end made everyone so nervous that at the sound of each alarm, Lucy and Rena would turn pale in the face and begin to shiver uncontrollably in spite of being dressed in all of their warmest clothing. The reason that Rena and Lucy were dressed so warmly was so that Wilma and Dori would just have to carry their own belongings and the blankets for everyone.

On November 14<sup>th</sup> there was an action in the entire country (as they later found out) against the partisans. The alarm came at 7:30 a.m. Luckily, everyone was already dressed and luckily they did not know that the Germans had encircled the village in the early morning hours before beginning the attack. The family climbed up to the woods above the house as quickly as possible and then made their way further up the mountain. There was shooting from all sides and so they lay down in the snow under the heavily snow covered trees. Not even moving a finger, they whispered to the girls to not move either. The bullets whizzed over their heads as they lay there for hours. At around noon the shooting stopped, but they didn't dare to return to the village. Instead, they walked further up the mountain and found a crude bunker made from fir branches which was leaning against two trees. Though it had no entrance covering, the inside (which was about 6 feet by 8 feet) was almost free of snow. After a while, two gendarmes who had been fighting against the Germans, joined them. Later on, a family consisting of a father, mother and three little girls arrived too, and everyone huddled together in the little bunker. Wilma had brought some flour and lard mixture as well as some army coffee cubes, but they did not dare to light a fire since it might be seen from a distance.

During the day, a horse, one of the many abandoned by fleeing soldiers in the high mountains, approached the shelter and stood in the snow with his head lowered from weakness. Everyone wanted to help him but there was nothing which could be used for fodder. He stood there for the afternoon, about 10 feet from the shelter, looking in on everyone with sad eyes. The next morning he was found lying in the snow, too weak to stand.

Because there was not enough bread, Wilma and Dori gave it all to Lucy and Rena to eat with their salami, while Wilma and Dori just ate their salami on its own. On the second day, they melted some snow for coffee, tea and soup. All of this was prepared from snow since there were no springs on the mountain (or at least no springs that anyone knew of). They were amazed by how much snow it took to just make four cups of hot water. They shared the little that they had with the gendarmes, who did not have any food with them, but the other family had brought some emergency food of their own. For the night, Dori took the place on the ground at the entrance to the bunker. Rena lay next to him and both suffered from bad frostbite on their feet. Making matters worse, damp clothing and shoes could not be removed. On the fourth day, they finally decided to risk going back down to the village. In the meantime, the poor horse in front of the shelter had died.

When they arrived back at the No. 13 house, there were other people (radiologist Dr. Kraemer and others) who did not want to let them back in but with Dori's insistence, they managed to get back their little space on the floor beside the stove.

They then heard what had happened while they had been hiding in the woods. The Germans had taken many people during their raid and had searched the woods around the village except for a narrow section where the family had taken refuge. Everywhere else in the surrounding woods were dead people who had been caught in the cross-fire. Living at No. 13 before that first raid was a widow from Banská Bystrica (a furniture manufacturer) who was with her 11 and 15 year old boys. In the confusion of the raid Wilma and Dori didn't see which way they tried to escape but on their return, they then heard that the Germans had found them in the woods and taken them along with them. They were shot, and never heard from again.

Another couple, Willy Klein (who happened to be Aunt Frida's stepson by her second marriage) and his wife had run into the woods too. As the Germans penetrated the woods they stood immobile, each attached to a tree. Willy's wife made a tiny movement however and when one of the soldiers saw her, she was yanked out of her hiding place. He started hitting her and asking her where the others were hidden but she remained silent. When another German soldier started hitting her as well, Willy could take it no longer and stepped out from behind his tree. He then endured a terrible beating by both soldiers before being dragged along by them out of the woods. His wife ran further into the woods for hours until she stumbled into a bunker high up on the ridge, half frozen and starved. In the bunker were six Russian partisans, four of them sick or wounded, with the other two taking care of them. When they heard someone approach the bunker they came out with their shotguns, and were surprised to see a woman who was here all by herself. They took her in and she stayed with them for the rest of the winter, becoming the captain's mistress, taking care of the wounded, and cooking and washing for the group. Wilma and Dori met him later on and in Wilma's words "we found him highly intelligent and quite cultured".

During the raid, some of the Germans had actually tried to be friendly with some of the people in Kalište, telling them encouragingly "We Germans kaputt", and that was on November 14, 1944. But this did not deter the majority of the raiding party to take with them 50 or 60 people found hiding in the woods, and none of them were ever heard from again.

After the family's return from the woods, they started into what became almost a routine life. Kalište had just one tiny part-time store located in a home, managed by Sabina and her grown son. After a few weeks she found that the refugees were asking for things which she had not sold before such as soap

(villagers made their own), toilet paper, bread (villagers baked their own), salt and sugar. Her son went down to the valley to get some of these things and later on he hired other villagers to come with him and help carry these valuable items up the mountain. Sabina sold them at a good profit. Then they started to buy cows in the valley which they would drive up the mountain paths and then slaughter, selling the meat to villagers.

There was just one well in the village from which the villagers had to collect water in big buckets for cooking, drinking, bathing and laundering (the laundering was sometimes done in a little dugout below the well). In each house there was a knee-high shelf on which the two water pails were placed, with a big metal cup for dipping into the pails for either cooking or drinking. The well was at the lower edge of the village and about a quarter mile from No. 13. To carry the water pails up the steep path was quite strenuous and as a result, the men in the household watched over the use of the water like hawks. The lack of water meant that teeth, hands and faces were only cleaned in the morning in a tiny wash basin and then one had to wait for the next day. Once a week the women and children in the house had a sponge bath in the same tiny wash basin and then changed their underwear, while the men did the same on another day.

All through this routine period there was the eternal threat of a German attack, since the Germans knew that the village was a Russian partisan refuge. At times of alarm, the partisans would retreat from the village and the family would follow. Rucksacks were always at the ready and each time there was an alarm, Lucy and Rena would quickly get themselves ready, faces turning pale green with fright. Many of the alarms turned out to be false but one never knew and so all alarms had to be taken seriously.

On December 5<sup>th</sup>, the farmer at the house grew ill and his wife had to call one of the refugee doctors in the village, Dr. Heller from Bratislava. After examining Mr. Tišliar, the nine "houseguests" followed him out of the house and asked what was wrong. The doctor shrugged, said it looked very much like typhus and that he had taken specimens and would send them down to the hospital in Banská Bystrica for examination. Everyone was disquieted about the news and Dori immediately began looking for other lodging since they had been sleeping and living in the same house as the ill farmer. He walked from house to house in the village but there was no space anywhere. Where partisans lived, no civilian refugees were taken in, and the other houses were just as crowded as the one that Dori and the family were living in.

Two days later, Mrs. Tišliar fell ill as well, and it was also diagnosed as typhus. Day by day they got sicker and sicker, and some of the people in the house left for the valley rather than continuing to stay in the same room as the sick couple. The radiologist and his wife left, along with a young woman whose husband was with the partisans in another area. Still others moved down to Podkonice, a village almost at the bottom of the valley. Only Dr. Gal (a lawyer) and his wife remained with Wilma and Dori and the girls, and Wilma refused to head to the valley, knowing that it was no safer than being in a house with typhus.

On December 10, the farmer was taken to the hospital in Banská Bystrica. He was very weak and had to be carried down on a stretcher. His wife, who was feeling much better, stayed behind. The farmer ended up dying in Banská Bystrica.

In the meantime, winter had arrived, snow was falling again and since there was no thaw, the layers of snow built up. Just to go to the outhouse, one had to get dressed from head to foot.

There were Russian soldiers in the house as well, although they were in a different room. There was of course no electricity – only candles and oil lamps. The “bathroom” was an outhouse but even that got snowed in during the winter and the men in the house worked together to build trench latrines in the snow, closer to the house. There was one for the men and one for the women. Lucy later recalled that there didn’t seem to be any other children around and there certainly was no school. One of the Russian soldiers however, a man named Nikolai from St. Petersburg, had daughters of his own and took pleasure in entertaining her and Rena and singing to them (including the well-known song Kalinka). Both girls also had one small 3 inch doll each for entertainment which had been packed in their rucksacks.

Bathing was not possible. The best that anyone could do was to dab at themselves from a basin in the kitchen. Once a week water was hauled uphill by the men from the central well at the bottom of the village, with the women all having a “bath”, followed by the men. Dori spent most of his free time looking for food and when anything was available in the village, he bought it. Apart from the occasional salami, the main things to eat were beans and potatoes, usually in a soup. There were also sardines which Dori had brought with him and hidden in the basement in the event of an emergency.

December 11 at about 11 a.m. was an ordinary morning, and Wilma was cooking a makeshift risotto made with rice from the army stores abandoned in Donovaly. As she was cooking, they heard someone outside yell “The Germans are coming from Mostenica”. When they looked out the windows they saw the Germans approaching through the snow in the meadow below. The family started

to get ready to run into the woods when 8-year-old Lucy said "I'm not going into the woods". At first Dori and Wilma tried to persuade her but then Dori said "All right. Maybe she feels something. Maybe she'll survive here and would not in the woods." So the family took a quick leave after hurried instructions to Lucy about her new name "Lucy Tišliarova", as the daughter of the landlady. Mrs. Tišliar did not mind Lucy staying, and promised to look after her. With that, Dori, Wilma and Rena took their leave with two young couples from the neighbourhood.

They ran along a path diametrically opposite from Mostenica and worried that the Germans just had to follow the path to catch them by following their footsteps in the snow. Therefore, when they came to a little brook after 30 minutes that had to be crossed, they did so and waded upstream about 200-300 steps. In doing so, they hoped to mislead the Germans. They sat on their knapsacks under heavily snow-covered trees on the edge of the brook – shoes, socks and pants dripping wet. They sat there very quietly, just whispering, when they saw a formation of men on a distant slope. Not able to tell whether they were Germans or partisans, they sat there for hours. When they heard no more shooting by 4 p.m., they decided to continue along the path. They hoped to reach a bunker community on top of the mountain. In one of the bunkers lived a couple that they knew, from whom they had often purchased food in the village when it was available and stored it for when the couple came down from the mountain to get provisions. They hoped that the couple would take them in now that they needed help, however they did not know the way since the direction had only been casually described to them.

Wilma said that in retrospect it sounded easy to say that they should have just taken the snow path but there was a terrific wind which had covered the path with snow. In addition, there were other paths leading away from this one but they headed towards soldiers' and partisans' bunkers and were off limits to civilians. Finally, it had become dark, and nobody could see a thing. As usual, Dori carried a heavy burden with all of the necessary things and he sank into the light snow up to his hips with every step. Wilma described it as heartbreaking to see his strenuous progress but she was also loaded to capacity. Wilma and Rena had to wait for Dori again and again and were afraid that they had lost their way when at last they saw a tiny light in the distance and realized that they had inadvertently found their way. Although it wasn't Paul's bunker, the people in it told them where to find it and so they walked on but in better spirits than before. When they arrived, they found that there was very little space so one of the men went to another bunker not too far away to see if they could take in little Rena. The people in the other bunker were good enough to do so and they had a sturdy little shelter built with air force material by Czechoslovak airmen who had then abandoned it.

When being interviewed for the Shoah Foundation, Lucy said that Wilma had a terrific sense of direction which probably saved them on numerous occasions. It was that sense of direction which helped her to guide the family through the dark woods, without trails, to the bunkers.

The Neumann family also moved in – father, mother and a 10-year-old boy. Their tent consisted of a log frame base and a tent on top of it. They had a little stove with a stove pipe leading out of the tent. It was a good tent but tiny, and during the daytime Wilma and Dori had to pick up Rena and keep her in their horrible tent with Paul K. It was quite big and in the door opening was a potato sack which was supposed to keep the cold outside. Nobody could even think of washing their faces or hands – they just wiped their hands in the snow outside the tent. They could not take off their coats or shoes either, as it was much too cold for that. There was an upright gasoline barrel in the middle of the tent with a 7 x 10 opening cut out at the base through which the barrel was fed with firewood, and a 5 inch wide opening across the middle of the top for the smoke to escape. The smoke simply escaped into the tent however. After three days of it, everyone had inflamed eyes. All of the men had to fetch wood daily to feed the forever hungry stove. Since they cut fresh trees, the wood was wet and produced even more smoke. They had to be careful not to stand up and get their heads into the area of the smoke, so they crouched, knelt or sat at all times.

The best thing in the tent was the car seats which were removed from trucks and cars driven high up in to the mountains and abandoned. When the uprising was squashed all of the army units did their best to drive cars, trucks and tanks as high up into the mountains as they could, so that it would be hopeless to get them down and in working order again by the Germans. They were stuck between trees and on tree roots and only the naves of the cars were visible above the ground, and the army trucks were still loaded with provisions from which the family had profited just the month before. The abandoned car seats taken from these cars and trucks were placed on the floor and made quite acceptable seats during the day and beds during the night.

Meat was kept right outside the door in the deep snow and it was frozen hard. Wilma had brought with them some food of their own, and she cooked her “one-pot casseroles” on top of the gasoline barrel when Katka was not using it. There were occasional squabbles between the original people in the tent, and the men accused Katka that she left the best part of the soup (ie. the thickened bottom) for her husband.



Paul K and Katka sometimes talked of their 18 month old son whom they had left, along with false papers, with Paul's mother in Donovaly. Katka sang lullabies nightly, thinking of her little boy, and the family joined in the singing. During the day Paul and Katka looked from the mountaintop down to Donovaly with the fervent hope that their little boy was safe.

Every day the two men had the task of getting wood for the oil drum. One day when Dori went out with Mr. Pick to get wood, they were accosted deep in the forest by two Russian guerillas who asked Mr. Pick for money. Everyone knew that Mr. Pick didn't have any money but the Russian put his revolver to Mr. Pick's head and threatened to shoot him on the spot if he didn't hand over his money. Poor Mr. Pick just lifted his shoulders and waited for the shot. When the Russians realized that they couldn't get anything from Mr. Pick, they turned to Dori and ordered him to take off his warm leather coat. Dori pleaded with them – it was December and living in the woods made it necessary to have a coat. Then one of the Russians took off his own shabby leather coat from his thin frame and offered it in return for Dori's ample (normal weight of 200lbs) coat. When he saw that the Russian was not impressed, Dori took off his coat and struggled into the smaller coat that the Russian left behind. Pick and Dori were actually lucky though – other people with similar encounters in the woods were never heard from again. Dori found that he couldn't wear the small Russian coat so he stayed the rest of the time in the woods without an overcoat.

One of the men in Paul's tent, a Ukrainian named Segal, had come down from the mountain to Kalište from time to time to pick up some bread, potatoes, meat or other provisions when available and therefore Wilma and Dori already knew him. When the family had been up in the woods for three days and Segal got ready to go back into Kalište for some food, Wilma and Dori asked him to check with Lucy as to whether she wanted to join them. When it got dark, Segal returned with a huge loaf of bread and little Lucy. She told Wilma and Dori that that Germans didn't get up to the village but they came close and she had been terribly scared and had wished that she had gone with her family. The good people in Rena's tent also took Lucy into the little space that they had. During the day the children came over to Paul's tent and the family was together. After a few days Wilma began to feel an itchy "eczema" and a day or two later, the children had it too.

It was an awful life upon on the mountain and after 11 days Wilma decided that she and the children couldn't stay up there any longer and had to return to Kalište. At the last moment, Dori decided to go with them. The men in general tried to keep as far away as possible from the Germans, since they took along all able-bodied men that they found. But still, they returned together to their house in Kalište, just in time to take part in the funeral of their farmer, who had died of typhus in the hospital and was brought back to be buried in Kalište.

They continued living in the house with the farmer's widow and the elderly couple. It was an uneasy Christmas and they thought daily that they could not endure the tension any longer. In addition, a day or two after returning from the mountain they discovered that it was not eczema which they had but body and hair lice which they had picked up in the bunkers. They also had bedbugs. All of this led to a steady struggle with the lice – always itchy and always trying to get rid of it. They did not completely rid themselves of lice until about a month after the war, when they were back down in the valley. Other people in Kalište had also gotten lice, probably from passing soldiers, and the lice was most likely the source of the typhus epidemic which was now spreading through the village. In every house there were typhus patients, some of them surviving but some of them succumbing. By some miracle, the family never caught typhus.

Although time went on, the family felt like time had stopped and that they would never live to see liberation. Often the most improbable rumours made the rounds. Some of them were good, such as the Russians being only 30 miles away, the town of Zvolen having fallen, and revolution in Vienna. All of the rumours found receptive ears with everyone wishing them to be true but as each rumour was proved to just be a fantasy, people stopped believing.

Christmas 1944, while gloomy, was a day with no alarms and no running into the woods. Lucy mentioned years later that Dori somehow managed to find a couple of candle stubs and ornaments and that he and Wilma managed to fashion a couple of little gifts for the girls together with a tiny Christmas tree which they set up on the sewing machine. What the gifts were has long been forgotten but there was, for a brief moment, a respite from the war and an attempt at a celebration. As Lucy has said, Wilma and Dori were amazing.

## **1945**

After Christmas, a few dark days went by and New Year's Eve came. Everyone was sleeping when all at once Dori sprang up and shouted "The offensive has started!" It was exactly midnight and as the family ran outside, they could see far into the wide valleys below all kinds of coloured lights and rockets of red, green, yellow and blue. It was beautiful and everyone was delighted and hopeful but in the morning when everything was quiet, they asked the partisans whether the offensive had begun. They were met with laughter as the partisans explained that this was the way in which the Germans celebrated New Year's Eve. The family's disappointment reached monstrous proportions and their courage was gone. Two desperate weeks followed, during which Wilma and Dori almost wished to not wake up in the morning. Looking back, Wilma commented that when she couldn't sleep she forced herself to replay entire symphonies and piano sonatas and concertos in her mind until she became tired and fell asleep again, which she found to be a consolation.

On January 14<sup>th</sup>, the great offensive finally started and the family hoped that this time the front line would reach them. Krakow fell, Prešov and Košice fell, and the Russians seemed to approach by leaps and bounds. Brežno fell and then the Russians were very close. Daily, groups of Hungarian deserters joined the partisans, increasing in numbers day by day from 150 to 300 to 400. They brought with them provisions, tobacco and cigarettes, and weapons such as mine throwers and heavy machine guns which they were especially happy to have taken from the Germans. But now it became necessary to expand the little guerilla republic because in Kalište and the neighbouring Balaže there was not enough space for 1,500 to 1,800 people.

The partisans together with the Hungarians spread into neighbouring hamlets and villages. The area of the partisans extended from the gates of Banška Bystrica to just before Ružomberok, which included 20-30 communities. The supply situation was good and in fact everything would have been in excellent shape but for the occurrence of the event which the family most feared – the front line stopped about 15 miles away from Kalište. This was on February 1<sup>st</sup> but nobody in the village yet knew that the front line had stopped. Everyone expected daily to see a move ahead by the Russians but nothing happened for weeks and finally everyone could see the ominous signs. The Germans strengthened their numbers close to the front line and cleaned out one village after another in order to assure themselves a certain degree of safety.

On February 16<sup>th</sup> when Wilma and Dori looked out the window early in the morning they saw smoke and yellow tongues of fire rising behind trees on the slope under Kalište. They then heard from some villagers that the Germans had made a mine attack on Priechod, then taken it and set fire to the village. Now they knew what they could expect on any day or even at any hour. They were reluctant to go up to the bunker again since they were now hearing the most horrible stories - bandits who made assaults on the bunkers, shooting all of the occupants and stealing everything; Germans making forays up into the mountains and either doing the same or dragging the occupants back down the mountain to some unknown fate. So they waited and lived through innumerable alarms and every second or third day made their way towards the woods. Everyone was a nervous wreck and when there was an alarm Lucy and Rena began shaking all over and grew pale, although they automatically started dressing in a hurry to save their little lives. It was heartbreaking for Wilma to see them like that.

The family now rose at 5:00 a.m. each day and got completely dressed. And Wilma now always had enough bread prepared so that they could last on it in the forest for several days if necessary.

There continued to be rumours that the front line would start moving again shortly and there were even optimists who predicted dates for that, but none of the predictions came true. The family could see from their 4,000 foot elevation one community after another going up in flames in the valley – 20 to 60 miles away – all of them being harshly punished for being partisan strongholds or “bandits’ nests” as the Germans called them.

On February 23<sup>rd</sup> at about 8:00 a.m., the family heard a few rifle shots, followed by more. When they ran out the door to check they found the Russian partisans laughing and shooting their rifles and pistols in the air. It was Red Army Day, their national holiday, and this was their way to celebrate it. They shot away, laughing and yelling, and it was an awful noise. From inside, Wilma heard Rena screaming. She hurried inside and found her running from one dark corner of the kitchen to another, huddling, trying to hide from the fearsome noise and dread, holding her ears and crying: “I can’t take it, I can’t take it Mami! What shall I do? I am going crazy!” She was not yet 7 years old and the hunted expression in her eyes made Wilma almost cry as well. All of Wilma’s hugging and quietly talking to Rena didn’t help, and she could not stop crying, holding her ears and looking like a hunted animal. The senseless noise lasted for an hour, by which time poor Rena was exhausted. That morning, together with countless other frightening moments, left Rena quite sensitive to even minor upsets for years to come. Nowadays, she probably would have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress syndrome. As for Lucy, years later she said that the word Kalište meant “fear” to her, day and night. There was nothing for that time but trying to survive, in

constant fear. In fact, people in the village used to joke that it was a dangerous time when Lucy's face went white or she started shaking.

Soon after that they heard the first rumours that the partisans were thinking of crossing the Russian frontline and joining the approaching Red Army. The fact was that everyone had again started to starve – the Germans had occupied almost the entire area formerly held by partisans and therefore the food situation became worse since connection with nearby villages was cut. Then they heard that the partisans had orders by radio from Kiev to slowly retreat behind the frontline. This was shocking news, as the family knew that only the partisans kept the Germans away from Kalište. They began thinking about going along with one of the retreating groups but several people told them that they would not have a chance to keep up with the marchers since the children were with them and the retreat would include a march along a mountain ridge over the Prašivá, Chabenec and Dumbier mountains.

It was March and as they heard afterwards, the sun melted during the day and people were sinking through the snow crust up to their hips. And during the night, the crust froze into a smooth, slippery mirror-like surface and people had to hold on to each other and form human chains to not be blown off the ridge. They also heard that groups marched one day for 22 hours and then for another 26 hours after a short sleep. In addition to all of these difficulties, there was the possibility of coming upon German patrols and having the partisans take up the fight. So afterwards, Wilma and Dori were glad to have listened to the advice to not leave with the children.

March 4<sup>th</sup> was Wilma's 36<sup>th</sup> birthday and Lucy later recalled that she and Rena (with some help from Nikolai) made her a cake of snow, with tiny branches laid on top to spell out the number 32. That was the age the girls believed their mother to be, as she had not told them that her actual age was 36.

In the beginning of March the first groups of partisans started to leave, first 150 men, then 200 men and women. When the last of the actual Kalište garrison left on March 16, everyone began to feel how precarious their situation was. Only about 80 Hungarian deserters from the Hitler army were left behind by the partisans to "guard" the village. On the next day there was an alarm again and the family ran in an entirely different direction in the woods, far away, down a steep slope, crossing a brook and then climbing a very steep slope on the other side. There they waited until evening, at which point they marched back and arrived in Kalište at about 10 p.m. They were wet from the soft snow and perspiration, and loaded down with rucksacks, bread-bags and blankets. They fell onto their sleeping space with the intention of sleeping in a bit the next morning, but it was not to be.

In the morning at about 5:30 a.m. they were awakened by odd noises which they realized to be heavy machine guns firing at the village from all directions. They jumped up, dressed back into their wet clothing as fast as they could and then ran up behind the house into the woods. Everyone else in the village also fled towards their house and the neighbour's house and on into the woods, as all of the shooting was coming from below. Only the sick and their caretakers stayed behind, which was quite a few people since there were a number who were sick with typhus.

Wilma was the last to leave the house as she was in a hurry trying to get fresh undergarments for the girls. In the frenzy of getting dressed quickly and still feeling exhausted from the day before, she forgot to give the girls their rucksacks. As well, she only took a small rucksack with bread and a blanket, leaving her more important rucksack in the house because she was not sure she would be able to run quickly enough with it. All winter long, at every alarm, she had worn two skirts over her ski pants, both to keep warm and to have as many pieces of clothing with her as possible in case return to the house wouldn't be an option. On the day before however, she had seen how difficult it was to climb the steep slopes with two skirts, so this time she just left with her ski pants on. Dori did not take any of their excellent camel hair blankets, although he usually carried one of them. At the last moment, Wilma grabbed one and ran. The slope from the house to the woods was under furious fire as the Germans could see from far away that everyone was scrambling to get to the woods in this one place. A man climbing next to Dori, a high school teacher, was shot in the arm as he headed up towards the woods.

Once under cover of trees the family continued up the mountain, then from the top they went down and then up another mountain. At that point they sat under the fir trees in the snow with two other families, and didn't budge. The shooting didn't stop and they could still hear shots from far away at 1:00 p.m., with other shots sounding uncomfortably close. Although it got quieter later, they were unable to return to Kalište and needed to get further away from it. So at about 3:00 they got up and found a path which led away from Kalište. Walking softly on their toes, they barely spoke as they knew that voices carried under the trees. They walked until it began to get dark at 5:30, for fear of wandering off the path and into the deep snow. Although they had intended to walk until they reached another community, they ended up stopping in the middle of the forest. Dori sat down on his rucksack and Wilma sat on his briefcase, with the girls sitting below them and leaning against their legs. They sat until 5 a.m. like this, unable to get a wink of sleep, although the girls were able to get some sleep in their arms. When they got up at 5 a.m., everyone was frozen and stiff. They had their doubts about continuing to the next community as they could hear dogs barking and couldn't be sure that they were not German expeditions. So they decided to slowly

return towards Kalište, with the hope that they might find out on the way whether the Germans were gone.

They walked back slowly, sitting down here and there in the snow partly due to exhaustion and partly because they didn't want to arrive back in town in the morning. When they reached the last mountain before Kalište they stumbled over a bunker filled with people. From them, they heard that the Germans had left Kalište the day before on March 18<sup>th</sup> but had set the village on fire as they departed. Now the family hurried over the mountain and down to the village to see whether their house was gone along with their belongings and modest food reserves. From far away, while still in the forest, they could smell smoke. It was biting and couldn't be compared with smoke from a chimney or anything else. Even writing about it years later, Wilma said that she could still feel it in her nostrils, the smell of burning matter of every description. When they stepped out of the woods, the sight was horrible. There was no more Kalište.

Burned to the ground on March 18, 1945, all that was left of the village houses were the brick corners with their stoves. All of the houses had been built of wood on brick foundations and everything else was now gone. The wooden ruins were still smoking, with blackened snow running in rivers between the houses. The wooden fences between the properties were gone and it was impossible to tell which house was which. Here and there, Hungarian soldiers who had come to join the partisans and were left behind during the retreat, were lying dead in the runny black snow. Pieces of their uniforms were scattered about in the snow, along with coats, blankets and overthrows.

When they approached their house, they saw that it had been burnt down like all of the others. The cellar built from local stone was still standing and it had a separate entrance from the street rather than the house. They were therefore overjoyed when they found that about 50 pounds of their previous potatoes were still in the cellar, in addition to some salt pork. It was a real treasure.

Opposite the house was a tiny one-roomed house and somehow the people in it had managed to extinguish the fire when the Germans left for the next house. They took shelter in the attic of this primitive wooden building because the kitchen, the only real room in the house, was overcrowded. When talking to the others, they found out what had happened during the Germans' attack. In the morning, when Wilma and Dori were still scrambling up the steep incline into the woods, during the shouting, they heard the Germans yelling "Raus aus dem Wald. Haende hoch. Stehen bleiben." (Out of the woods. Hands up. Stop, don't move.) As they later heard, after that the Germans searched first the very nearest part of the woods and later on the more distant parts as well. They apparently got quite close to the place where the family had been quietly sitting through the night. In the meantime, the other Germans in the village went from house to house, taking

everything that they liked and then chasing people out without allowing them to take a single item with them. The villagers were escorted to about six houses at the lower end of the village, shoved 8-10 families into each house, and then the doors were locked. Then the German soldiers went to work in the empty houses. In some houses people were sick with typhus and could not be transported or were too sick to get up. For those people, the Germans simply shot them right there in their beds. One 80-year old man, paralyzed after a stroke, was quickly shot to death together with eight typhus patients. Then the houses were set on fire. The Germans did that by pulling the feather beds and pillows onto the wooden floors, pouring kerosene on them, and setting it all alight. Then they waited outside the houses with their automatic weapons at the ready, in case some people hidden in the houses tried to escape the fire. Nobody would have stood a chance but luckily the woods were so close that no able-bodied men had remained behind – every male from age 14 to about 60 had fled into the woods (although of course when the Germans searched the woods, they caught a few poor devils). Those people were taken along when the Germans left later in the day, to help drive the confiscated cattle down the mountain. From most of these villagers, there was never a word heard again. Wherever typhus patients had been removed from the houses at the first order and without objection, they were left alone. For those who hoped that they could save their lives by pleading for mercy however, they were shot.

In the lower part of the village where the six houses had been left standing, all of the villagers were forced to crowd into them, including those who had returned from the woods after the Germans retreated. They were left with nothing but the clothes on their backs, not even coats for the children, undergarments, blankets or food.

That evening Wilma, Dori and the children went up to their drafty attic with seven other people who had also lost their shelter. Since the house stood on a steep incline, as did all of the houses in Kalište, the entrance to the kitchen was a little below the street level but the entrance to the attic on the other side of the house was above street level and no steps or ladders were needed. This attic was, as many others, used as a barn in prior times. But when they entered it now there was no hay or straw around and the floor consisted of round logs. The family had only the one blanket which Wilma had grabbed at the last moment when running into the woods and in this blanket they wrapped the children, with Dori lying on one side of them and Wilma on the other in order to keep them as warm as possible. As Wilma wrote in later years, “I never lived through a night like this and the following nights on this attic. The nights in the woods, by comparison, were child’s play”. Up on the mountain at this point in time the days were stormy. The attic was built with thin boards and the edges didn’t fit together, so the wind blew in through every slit. The trees in the forest were actually better shelter than the attic. Dori and Wilma did not shut an eye, as the round logs under their emaciated



bodies hurt, the wind blew and there was no blanket to ward away the cold. It took days until they caught a nap of exhaustion and then again woke with their teeth chattering, lying awake for hours.

The first night was the worst because of the lack of blankets. The next day Dori went to pick up some of the army blankets scattered in the black snow. They had first wanted to avoid doing this because the blankets were probably from typhus patients in a military hospital in the forest in which the Germans had shot everyone who did not manage to escape. Some of the patients fleeing had lost their blankets and so Dori and Wilma were afraid to pick them up. But by the second day they were not afraid of anything except another similar night, so they were glad to get the blankets even though they were thin and more of a symbol than real protection.

At the same time, they had the most beautiful “concert” they could wish for – each day they heard louder and closer battle noises in the distant valley. The noises banged and roared and often yanked Wilma and Dori out of their short naps in the night but they did not mind. From their village high on the mountain they could follow the movement of the battle noise from East to West.

In spite of all of the difficulties in the burnt out village, at last Wilma found herself again. She took heart because she had the feeling that things could not get any worse. She climbed up to the ruins of their former lodging and started cleaning off debris from the stove and around it. She found an ax, of which just the handle had been burnt. A part of the wooden garden fence was left unburnt and she used the ax-head to make some firewood from it. Since she had carried matches with her, she soon had a fire roaring in the old stove under the open sky. After further searching in the ashes she also found her little stainless steel pot and three-quart cooking pot. Although they were badly scarred by the fire, she was very happy to have them. She made tea in the small pot and, turning the three-quart pot upside down, she baked some potatoes underneath it and they had a beautiful warm meal. When the other women saw what she was doing, they followed her lead and began scratching in the ashes for their things and cooking whatever simple meals they could. For lunch each day, Wilma made a full big pot of soup. Although she hoped that some of it would last until evening there never seemed to be enough and the whole pot was finished right away. Finally, there were some Romanian soldiers in the village after it was burned and almost unbelievably, they had some jam which they sold to Wilma.

On the second day after the village was burned, Wilma and Dori discovered a Hungarian soldier in the chimney corner of another house. He had a leg wound and couldn't walk but had somehow escaped detection by the Germans. He didn't have anything to eat and so they tried to share with him what little they had. Wilma felt so sorry for this young boy that she could have cried for him.

After scratching in the ruins some more, Wilma found another pot (with a hole burned into it), teaspoons, and forks and knives, all burnt black. She had always carried in her rucksack a big pack of a mixture of flour and lard, and Dori had carried it in his rucksack the last time they had hidden in the mountains. He had also carried along a little bit of bacon and they had that with some meat which they found in the cellar, the potatoes found in the cellar, and a little bit of tea.

The men in the village, including Dori, now got up at 4:00 each morning and climbed up to the edge of the forest behind Wilma and Dori's former house. There they sat, wrapped in their blankets and observing the access to the village from this high point. When they saw something suspicious, they disappeared into the woods. At that time they knew that these were probably the last difficult days and the men in particular wanted to avoid being dragged away by the Germans during a final raid. They also knew, or at least hoped, that the Germans would not have enough time to bother with women or children any longer. Dori had frostbitten feet and toes from the November nights in the fir tree bunker and now, with his daily vigils at the end of the woods with the other men, his frostbit was very bad. In fact, without realizing it, he had a thrombosis in his leg. He was hardly able to stand on his feet and every morning when getting up he tottered and staggered about like a drunk. The pain was so piercing that his feet could not bear the weight of his now light body. But still he went up to the woods each day. As for Lucy and Rena, they were always freezing cold, whether inside or outside the attic, and they always begged to be allowed down into the kitchen of the house. But in the kitchen there were two people who were sick with typhus and so with a heavy heart, Wilma let them cry and made them blow on their cold hands rather than risking exposure to typhus.

In the attic they had just one little pocket comb which Dori had in his pocket when they had run from home before Christmas. With this, everyone combed their hair. The family also shared one towel which Dori accidentally had in his backpack, as well as a little piece of soap. There was not even a toothbrush, a needle or thread, and Wilma and the girls had no change of underwear. Almost all that they had was what was on them when they left the house before it burned down. Fortunately, Dori had put a special emphasis on food and his backpack was filled with food treasures. He had also packed some tins of sardines in the basement of the house for an emergency but those burned with the village.

Kalište was burnt down on March 18<sup>th</sup> and after that the family lived this difficult and hardly bearable life. In the morning, it was painful for Wilma to see how poor Dori forced himself to stand on his abused feet when the other men started up to the edge of the woods. The days went by and Monday, March 26<sup>th</sup> came. The heavy artillery and shooting down in the valley had definitely shifted to the West during the last few days. Just before noon, Wilma and Dori observed two men emerging from the lower edge of the woods surrounding the village and they seemed to be civilians. Some of the men ran down to investigate and found that they were Kalištenians who had been forced by the Germans to drive the stolen cattle down the mountain a week earlier. Somehow they had managed to abscond in the general confusion of the German retreat, and they hurried back home. They said they were coming from Mostenica, which was full of Russian and Romanian soldiers, and that it was expected that Banská Bystrica would fall that same day.

When Wilma and Dori heard this, they realized even more how impossible it had become to endure any longer up on their mountain. Although the front line was so close and not really established yet, they decided to descend into the valley that afternoon, in the direction of Mostenica, which was the easternmost way they could take (ie. away from the frontline). They left burnt out Kalište after the most difficult five months of their lives, and a few other people joined them for the descent. They knew that the partisans had planted mines for protection of the village and therefore one man took the lead walking very carefully on the well-trodden path and everybody behind him stepped carefully in his steps. (One day before Kalište was burned, an elderly couple wanting to escape the frontline fighting in the valley, had come up the mountain. Just before they stepped out of the lower edge of the forest to the open village, the man stepped on a mine and was killed.) The group had not walked more than ten minutes when they found the dead older farmers, taken by the Germans a week ago who could not keep up the pace and were shot on the spot, still within calling distance from the village. A week had passed since they had been shot but there they were, and even very young Lucy and Rena looked at them, considering their death a fact of life.

When they arrived in Mostenica at about 3:30, they found the village filled with Romanian soldiers. It was impossible to find shelter for the four of them, so they decided to walk on to Podkonice. Up on the mountain there had still been lots of snow but down in the valley, the grass was starting to come up. The battle noise was deafening as they approached the front line and both Lucy and Rena were terrified with each new salvo, at times cowering on their haunches and crying, not wanting to continue. But down the mountain they were now all still alive. There were some people not as lucky as them, for example, the man in the kitchen under their attic who had typhus. He was in such bad shape that he and his family could not leave Kalište on the same day that they did. The next day, the first Russian and Romanian patrol came up to the village and at the same time, a

Hungarian patrol came from the other side and started shooting. One of the bullets penetrated the wooden log wall of the tiny house and entered the thigh of the typhus patient. It was four days before two men were willing to risk their lives carrying him down the mountain on a stretcher and by that time he had developed blood poisoning and gangrene. He died at the field hospital that same day. He must have had some foreboding, as he was always the first one to run out of the house during alarms throughout the winter.

Another man with his wife and two teenage boys also went down to Mostenica, happy about their good luck since the boys had caught typhus but come through it all right. Down in Mostenica, Romanian soldiers drove some horse wagons loaded high with hay along the road. The family was trudging along and at their request, permitted to climb up on one of the wagons for a ride. As they were riding along, a wheel broke, they fell off the hay stacks, and the father broke his neck.

In Wilma and Dori's house in Kalište, there was also a young woman whose husband, an officer, had stayed with his troops. She talked about him a lot and dreamed of and lived for the moment they would meet again. As the family later heard, he did the same. When the frontline passed, he took a short furlough to meet his wife at their lodging in Banska Bystrica. He arrived first and the landlady told him to come with her to the basement for the night since German shells were still falling on the town. But he refused, saying that he had slept long enough on floors and he wanted to sleep in his own bed. The next morning he was found by the landlady, torn apart by a grenade in the demolished room.

Getting back to Wilma and Dori's story, they were continuing on their walk from Mostenica to Podkonice. It was getting late and they were hurrying to find lodging in Podkonice before dark. When they reached the village they were so exhausted that they couldn't even think of walking from house to house. On the village square was a school with a wide veranda all around. They went up to the veranda and looked in the windows. The school was empty with straw on the floor in the classrooms, indicating that German soldiers had been sleeping there. They climbed in through a half-opened window but decided not to sleep on the straw as there could be shells or explosives left behind as booby traps. They found the school kitchen with nothing in it except a hearth and some stacked wood. They made a fire and were frightened a few times when some shells exploded in the hearth – probably thrown in with waste paper days before. But everything went well. They had a warm room for themselves – a luxury - and made their usual tea and soup on top of the hearth before bedding down on the wooden floor. After months of sleeping on the floor, it did not seem overly difficult.

The next morning Dori started to look for lodging, while Wilma stayed at the school with Lucy and Rena. A woman who had just lost her husband took them in, but just for three days as she wanted to clean her house for Easter. They moved in with their two rucksacks and then Dori collapsed. He was in bed and couldn't stand at all, as his legs were dreadfully swollen and he had a high fever. They couldn't mention the fever to the owner of the house though, as she would have thrown them out right away. The people in Podkonice didn't take anyone coming from Kalište, knowing of the typhus epidemic up on the mountain. Wilma was terrified that Dori's fever was the start of typhus but it turned out to be the thrombosis in his legs. Luckily, they had the excuse of Dori's legs and he was able to stay in bed throughout his fever. Only much later did they realize how lucky they were that the front line had passed at that time and not a week or two later, otherwise Dori would not have survived. He was entirely without will and without energy, although throughout the long winter it was he who had helped Wilma to keep up her spirits and helped her to survive the ordeal with the girls. After the burning of Kalište, Wilma found her energy again and down in Podkonice, she took over from her weakened Dori.

### **Postscript**

After being burned to the ground, Kalište was never rebuilt. The remains of Kalište are now looked after by the Museum of the National Slovak Uprising. Only two houses now remain, with remnants of foundations outlining the other 36 houses which were in the village. Kalište is one of 102 villages in Slovakia which were destroyed by the Germans or their proxies on their retreat at the end of WWII.



*(Rena, Wilma, Dori & Lucy after the war – 1946)*



*Lucy & Rena – 1945 (after the war)*



